

## What To Do If You Need Help

If you have reason to believe that your child is setting fires, take immediate action. Start by contacting your local fire department. Some fire departments have screening and referral programs for children who set or play with fire. If you feel that counseling or treatment may be necessary, contact your County Mental Health Association. They can evaluate your child's situation to determine what type of intervention might be appropriate.



**JUVENILE FIRESETTERS  
HOT LINE:**

**1-800-357-5230**



STATE OF NEW JERSEY  
Christine Todd Whitman  
*Governor*

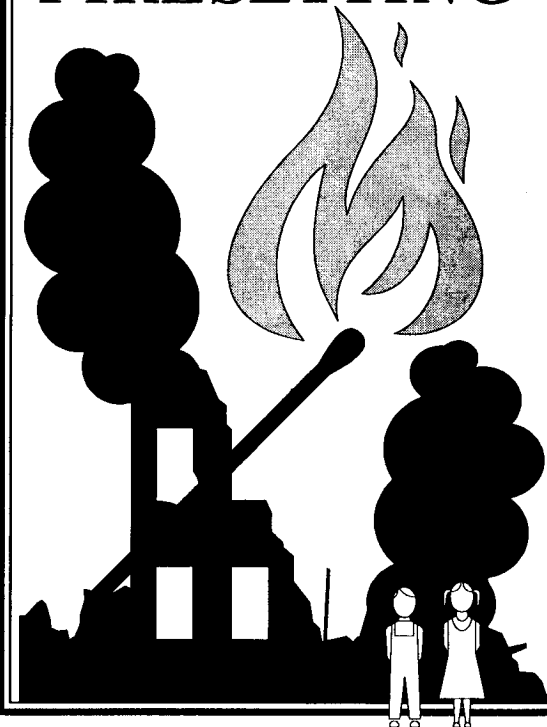
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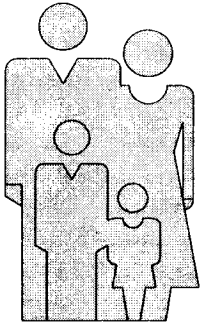
Community  
Affairs

DEPARTMENT  
OF  
COMMUNITY AFFAIRS  
Jane M. Kenny  
*Commissioner*

## A Parent's Guide to **JUVENILE FIRESETTING**



DIVISION OF FIRE SAFETY  
William H. Cane, *Director*



## Is Your Child a Juvenile Firesetter?

If you feel that your child's fascination with fire poses a threat to your safety or the safety of others, you're not alone. National statistics indicate that approximately half of all arson fires are set by juveniles, that the leading cause of fire deaths for children under 5 is "children playing with fire," and that one-sixth of all juveniles arrested for arson are under ten years of age.

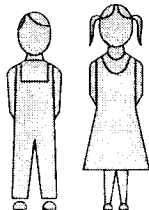
Why do these children set fires? The reasons are complex and varied. They may be simply curious about fire, they may be setting fires as a way of crying out for help with personal problems, or they may be misusing fire intentionally for excitement, revenge, or even sexual gratification. Sometimes even the appropriate use of fire can become a problem because of a juvenile's lack of skill, knowledge, or judgement. But whatever the reason, the potential for a major catastrophe as a result of juvenile firesetting is enormous.

Juveniles firesetters are generally categorized into the following groups:

- **LEVEL ONE (Low Risk).** Children classified at this level are considered normal and have been involved in fireplay mainly for reasons of curiosity, experimentation, exploration, or by accident. These children are often called "curiosity firesetters" and usually respond well to an educational approach.

- **LEVEL TWO - Definite Risk** - Children with social problems who are recurrent firesetters even after educational intervention. These children are at risk of repeating firesetting episodes, and may require evaluation accompanied by one or more interventions such as counseling or psychotherapy.

- **LEVEL THREE (Extreme Risk).** Children in this category usually



have been involved in numerous firesetting incidents, including arson, and have a history of delinquent and antisocial behavior. Complete psychosocial evaluation, accompanied by one or more interventions, such as counseling, psychotherapy, or help from other agencies for the youngsters and their families is most effective.

Experts generally agree that firesetting after the age of eight is almost always deliberate, and, when permitted to continue without appropriate intervention, can result in injury or death.

## Firesetting Myths

**"It's normal for children to play with fire."**

Fact: While curiosity about fire is common, **fireplay or firesetting is not.**

**"It's a phase that he will grow out of."**

Fact: It is not a phase, and you must deal with it immediately or it will continue.

**"Firesetting is pyromania."**

Fact: Pyromania is a disorder - firesetting is not. Firesetting is a behavior which can have many reasons and which can be stopped.

## Telltale Signs of Juvenile Firesetting

- An unusual fascination with fire or burning buildings that comes up in the child's conversation.
- Charred paper in sinks or wastebaskets. Small burn holes in carpets or furniture.
- Matches or lighters hidden in your child's closet or under his bed.
- Fires of unknown origin found in your home.

## What Can You Do To Help Prevent Juvenile Firesetting?

- Teach very young children that fire is a tool we use to cook food and heat our homes; that it can be very dangerous if not used carefully; and that it should only be used by adults. When children are older (5-7), begin teaching them the proper uses of fire, like lighting candles on a cake, but only under adult supervision.

- Keep all matches and lighters out of the reach of very young children - the same as you would do with other items that have the potential to cause harm, such as medicines, tools, chemicals, sharp knives, etc.

- Teach children that if they find matches or lighters, they should bring them to you. Reward them or praise them when they do.

- If an older child is curious about matches, contact the fire prevention bureau of your local fire department for advice on teaching your child the proper way to start using matches under adult supervision.

- Teach your babysitters about fire safety. Tell them what to do in case of a fire. Have a list of emergency telephone numbers posted for your children or babysitter to use.

- Set a good example. Children learn about fire safety from their elders.

